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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines articles and research discussing the pros and cons of using black English reading materials in the teaching of initial reading to black-English speaking children. It evaluates articles and studies that compare subjects' performance on standard English and black English oral reading, oral reading comprehension, and silent reading tasks; that discuss the effect of the dialect of presentation or subjects' oral reading and/or oral reading comprehension; that consider the effect of orthographic form; and that show the effect the dialect of presentation had on subjects' silent reading comprehension performance. (TJ)

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The effect of dialect of presentation of Black children's reading performance: A review

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The effect of dialect of presentation on Black children's reading performance: A review

In the past decade the literature has been satiated with articles discussing the pros and cons of using Black English reading materials in the teaching of initial reading to Black English-speaking children. Numerous linguists and educators have suggested the use of dialect-based readers for initial reading instruction and the use of transition materials to introduce gradually standard English once reading fluency has been attained in the dialect readers and the child is sufficiently confident in his ability to read (e.g., Baratz, 1969; Fasold, 1971; Johnson, 1971; Laffey, 1970; Stewart, 1969). While the importance of children learning to read a system with which they are familiar has been stressed by several researchers (Baratz, 1970b; Ingram, 1969; Malmstrom, 1970; Tatham, 1970), not all researchers and educators have agreed that the intermediate step of teaching reading in the child's dialect is either necessary or desirable in teaching Black English-speaking children to read (e.g., Bailey, 1970; Douglass, 1973; Finocchario, 1971; Weber, 1970). The latter group suggesting that the Black English-speaking child can make his own substitutions or omissions when there is a conflict between his dialect and the printed page.

In contrast to the proliferation of position papers, a review of the literature indicates that only a relatively small number of studies have been reported which have actually compared subjects' performance on standard English and Black English oral reading, oral reading comprehension, and silent reading comprehension tasks. The characteristics of these studies are presented in Table 1 and are discussed below.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Of the four studies which examined the effect dialect of presentation had on subjects' oral reading and/or oral reading comprehension performance, only one (Harber, 1976) indicated evidence that dialect of presentation affects reading performance. A review of the four studies indicates major differences which restrict their comparability. First, in the studies by Liu (1975-76), Simons and Johnson (1974), and Sims (1972) the difficulty level of the oral reading stories was constant for all subjects. Liu (1975-76) and Simons and Johnson (1974) made no provisions for measuring the performance of subjects who were unable to read at the level at which the stories were written. Simons and Johnson (1974) stated that they eliminated non-readers (defined as those who made at least one reading miscue every two words on the low second grade stories); to their credit they recognized that the exclusion of these subjects might have masked the effect of dialect interference. Sims (1972) avoided the issue by limiting selection of subjects to those who had been placed in a reading group using a basal reader designed for the first half of grade two. Harber (1976), in contrast to the other authors, employed tests to measure oral reading and oral reading comprehension which assessed all reading levels from pre-primer through adult reading so that none of her third and fifth grade subjects had to be eliminated because of an inability to read at a given level. Baratz (1970a) suggested that the extent to which linguistic interference is a factor in oral reading performance is probably greater than the research shows

because in order to test a child he has to have attained a reading proficiency which precludes non-readers. This problem was minimized in the study by Harber (1976), by having passages available starting at the pre-primer level.

Secondly, the method by which comprehension was judged varied from study to study. Simons and Johnson (1974) measured comprehension in three ways: story recall, multiple choice questions, and specific reading miscues (substitutions, omissions, and insertions). Liu (1975-76) measured comprehension solely by an open-ended technique, whereas Harber (1976) measured comprehension by specific questions which, while not multiple choice in nature, did not require lengthy, spontaneous responses. Thus, the variety of measures used to assess comprehension severely limits comparability. Labov (1972) stated that certain procedures (e.g., open-ended questions) which are frequently used when interviewing and testing children are threatening to Black children and thus they perform poorly.

The effect of orthographic form was empirically tested in one study (Harber, 1976) and the results indicated that subjects scored significantly lower on the Black English nonstandard orthographic form than on either of the other two forms.

Three of the five studies which examined the effect dialect of presentation had on subjects' silent reading comprehension performance found no evidence that dialect of presentation affects reading performance (Andreacchi, 1973; Hockman, 1973; Nolen, 1972). The other two studies (Jaggar, 1971; Marwit and Neumann, 1974) found that both Black and white subjects scored higher on the standard English form of the silent raading comprehension test than on the Black English form. Marwit and Neumann (1974) suggested their results might have been obtained because of the subjects' familiarity with

standard English as the expected and accepted language of the classroom as well as their distrust of Black English in a setting which it is rarely used and almost never rewarded. Jaggar (1971) suggested that if structural interference is a prime source of silent reading comprehension problems for Black children then the effects probably are most serious for recent school entrants when these children have competence only in their native language. She further suggested that some structural interference can occur in silent reading without necessarily interfering with comprehension. Taken together these results suggest that presenting silent reading comprehension tasks written in Black English would not improve the reading performance of Black children. However, it is not known whether presenting reading materials written in Black English would have favorable effects on children's ethnic pride, as suggested by Andreacchi (1973).

What may one conclude about the effect dialect of presentation has on Black English-speaking children's reading performance? While the studies reported yield somewhat contradictory findings, this review suggests the following. First, further research should concentrate on the effect dialect of presentation has on Black English-speaking children's oral reading and oral reading comprehension performance, rather than silent reading comprehension performance since, at present, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that the provision of silent reading comprehension tasks written in Black English would benefit Black English-speaking children. Secondly, reading materials presented in Black English should be written in standard orthography. Thirdly, test materials should be available at all grade levels, so that no subjects have to be eliminated because of an inability to read at a given level. In addition, subjects should be allowed to read progressively more difficult passages until they can no longer handle the material. Harber (1976) suggested that Black English materials might be

most helpful at the point where the reading task becomes rather difficult. However, this hypothesis has not been empirically tested.

Fourthly, the various levels of comprehension (i.e., factual, inferential, and critical comprehension) should be assessed in ways which have been suggested as non-threatening to Black children. There is some empirical support for the notion that the influence of dialect of presentation becomes greater as the level of cognitive demands increases (Foster, 1969; Ramsey, 1972). Ramsey (1972) studied listening comprehension performance of first grade Black, inner-city children. One-half of her subjects listened to stories in standard English and were asked questions relating to these stories in standard English, while the other half were provided with Black English stimulus materials. Both factual and inferential questions were used to measure listening comprehension performance. She found that the two groups performed equally well on the factual questions regardless of the dialect of the stimulus materials. However, the subjects who had received the Black English stimulus materials outscored the subjects who had received the standard English stimulus materials on the inferential questions. Foster (1969) studied listening comprehension performance, verbal recall performance, and fluency and flexibility in assigning titles of tenth grade, Black, disadvantaged males. One-half of his subjects listened to stories in standard English and the other half listened to transformations of these stories in Black English. He found that the two groups performed equally well on the comprehension questions. However, the group that received the Black English stimuli scored significantly higher than the group that received the standard English stimuli on verbal recall and fluency and flexibility in assigning titles. These findings suggest that the effect dialect of presentation has on oral reading comprehension tasks of varying types and complexities should be empirically determined.

Fifthly, one cannot assume that all Black subjects speak Black English and all white subjects speak standard English. There is much evidence in the literature indicating that all Blacks do not speak exclusively Black English (Carroll and Feigenbaum, 1967; De Stefano, 1973; Dillard, 1972; Fasold and Wolfrom, 1970; Labov, 1967) and all whites do not speak exclusively standard English (Labov, 1967; Stewart, 1971). Thus, all subjects should be screened to determine their primary dialect before they are assigned to treatment groups. In addition to determining subjects' primary dialect, it would be advantageous to subdivide groups of young subjects according to their relative proficiency in standard English and Black English, i.e., subjects who are predominantly Black English speakers, subjects who are predominantly standard English speakers, and subjects who are bidialectal. Politzer, Hoover, and Brown (1974) and Baratz (cited in Politzer et al., 1974) found that kindergarten, first, and second graders who are predominantly Black English speakers scored more poorly on standard English reading achievement tests than subjects who were bidialectal or predominantly standard English speakers.

Finally, long-term longitudinal studies with carefully matched experimental and control groups should be carried out utilizing dialect-based readers and transition texts (Baratz, 1969; Fasold, 1971; Stewart, 1969) in order to clearly determine the effect of dialect of presentation on Black English-speaking children's oral reading and oral reading comprehension performance.

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Table I

Characteristics of Studies Reviewed

Author	Date	Number	Race	SES	Grade	Subjects Screened	Reading Task	Dialect of Reading Task	Findings
Harber	1976	180	B	L	3, 5	yes	Or, ORC	SE, BEso, BEno	BEso > SE > BEno
Liu	1975-76	30	B	N	2, 3	yes	OR, ORC	SE, BEso	SE = BEso
Simons and Johnson	1974	67	B	L	2, 3	yes	OR, ORC	SE, BEso	SE = BEso
Sims	1972	10	B	N	2	yes	OR	SE, BEso	SE = BEso
Andreacchi	1973	304	B	N	adoles-cents	no	SRC	SE, BEso	SE = BEso
Hockman	1973	266	B W	N N	3, 4, & 5	no	SRC	SE, BEso	SE = BEso
Jaggar	1971	160	B W	L M	3, 4	yes	SRC	SE, BEso	SE > BEso
Marwit and Neumann	1974	113	B W	N N	2	no	SRC	SE, BEso	SE > BEso
Nolen	1972	156	B W	L L	2, 4	no	SRC	SE, BEso	SE = BEso

Table I continued

Code:

Number = total number of subjects

Race

B = Black

W = White

SES

N = information not available

Reading Task

OR = Oral Reading

ORC = Oral Reading Comprehension

SRC = Silent Reading Comprehension

Dialect of Reading Task

SE = Standard English

BEso = Black English standard orthography

BEno = Black English nonstandard orthography

JH/gj